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CLASSROOM METHODS AND DEVICES

DRAMATIZATION AND CURRENT EVENTS

Dramatization, when used by teachers who realize its vital importance and its actual psychological basis, can be made to serve most of the subjects in the curriculum. There is a tendency to believe that dramatization can be made productive only when it deals with historical materials or purely imaginary situations. Why look always for ideals to the heroes of history, or to those created by imagination, when leaders who stand for big things in the present-day world may equally well be imitated through the medium of words and actions?

With this thought in mind a number of exercises were planned for intermediate-grade children, such as to lead them to visualize current events naturally and vividly and to put them into dramatic form. The class had been given no training of this kind. There had been no attempt toward enrichment in ideals, or toward the expression of the deeper feelings which are embodied in literature through dramatic reproduction. It seemed best, therefore, to begin by using recent world happenings which have a marked emphasis on the emotional side. Accordingly, the teacher chose for the first lesson the finding of Scott, the hero of the South Pole.

The children were to place themselves on the spot at the time of the rescue and were to express the emotions aroused in the rescue party when they read the part of Scott's diary which told of hardships, disappointments, and love of humanity. To read the words of the diary even once, without a vivid personal appreciation of the wonderful meaning behind them, would be to lose forever their deepest significance. For that reason the first expression was to be in writing. On the morning of the experiment the words at the end of Scott's diary were put on the board, and there arose a discussion as to the discovery of the South Pole, Amundsen's success, and Scott's vain efforts and death. When interest in the subject was at a high pitch the children were told to choose the

moment at which the rescue party came, then to decide and write what the different men would do and say at such a tragic and intense moment, ending their compositions by using Scott's own words. While they had talked much "about it and about," no hint of what the men might say had been made by anyone before writing. The following, written by a girl and selected for brevity, was one result.

FINDING OF SCOTT'S PARTY

SCENE: Inside of tent not far from South Pole.

CAST: Scott, Wilson, Bowers, Wright, Nelson, Gran (few others).

(Men uncover heads when entering)

NELSON *(steps inside tent, sees men in sleeping postures, turns pale at sight of smile on Bowers' face)*: God! He is still smiling, it almost gave me hope.

WRIGHT *(comes in, goes toward Scott, touches his face, shivers slightly)*: England's bravest men!

GRAN *(comes in, followed by others, sees Bowers, coughs to hide his emotion)*: How splendid to die smiling! And no word to tell us of their brave deeds.

WRIGHT *(looks thoughtful)*: Captain Scott must have been the last to pass away, for the others are securely wrapped in their sleeping bags, which he, of course, did, not being in his own sleeping bag. *(Moves Scott's hand, sees diary.)* What is this? Read, Nelson, while I search for other word.

NELSON *(takes diary, turns to first page)*.

GRAN *(impatiently)*: The last, man, read the last!

NELSON *(turns pale, reads)*: "We took risks; we knew we took them. Things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determining to do our best to the last. But if we have been willing to give up our lives to this enterprise, which is for the glory of our country, I appeal to our countrymen to see that those who depend on us are properly cared for. Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great, rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for.—R. SCOTT."

WRIGHT: How sad! And Amundsen was there before him.

GRAN *(emotionally)*: To seek, to strive, to find, and not to yield.

(Curtain)

The class read aloud their papers, but in most cases the reading was so much weaker than the writing as to prove that the lofty ideas and intense feeling expressed in writing could not yet find adequate oral expression. These plays were therefore not acted.

The study of facial expression was illuminating while the writing proceeded, especially that of one lad, the wag and terror of the building, who was absorbed and lifted out of himself as he wrote. The girl who wrote, "Heavens, they are dead!" gave the only evidence of convention intercepting strong feeling.

Our next venture was an oral one, using as the subject "With Mr. Edison the Morning after the Fire." On the day preceding the lesson the following assignment was made, and there were placed in the room magazines and encyclopedias containing necessary information:

1. Find out all you can about Edison as a boy and as a man.
2. What are some of the inventions he has made?

The lesson started with a talk about the fire at the West Orange factories on the night of December 9, the teacher asking at last how many would like to go to the fire the morning after. Of course, being live Americans they were all eager to attend, which they did by going to the front of the room, where they placed, in imagination, the ruins. One youth then said, "May I make a suggestion? We ought to have a fire line to keep the people back." The result was a quick trip to the cloakroom to find a jump-rope to serve for a check to the excited throng. They were then asked what they would naturally talk about at such a time, to which question there was but one answer: "Mr. Edison." Each one had his little store of information which came forth from the heart. Often two groups of children started to talk at once, but they soon learned the art of waiting until they could be heard, even the timid ones piping up at slack intervals.

FIRST CITIZEN: My, there was sure some fire around here last night.

SECOND C.: Yes, and it certainly will cost, I can tell you. Somebody's out a whole lot of money.

THIRD C.: Well, Mr. Edison won't be discouraged. I'll bet he'll start again.

FOURTH C.: Say, Mr. Edison is an old man now, but just think what he's done. Why, my grandfather said when Edison was a young boy, only ten, he had a chemical something or other in his cellar.

THIRD C.: Laboratory.

FOURTH C.: Oh, yes! Laboratory. And when he was fifteen he published a newspaper on the train.

FIRST C.: But that's nothing compared to what he's invented.

Then followed a dissertation on his inventions, with surprising technical knowledge on the part of the girls, who would catch up started sentences and finish them just as excited folks do in real life.

FIFTH C.: Why, just think, you can sit in your own parlor and hear the greatest singers in the world and all because Mr. Edison invented the phonograph in 1877.

SIXTH C.: That's nothing. Think what a lot of use he's been to the detectives. Why, man, in 1905 he invented the dictagraph. It takes down everything you say.

When the talk on inventions grew repetitive, the teacher suggested that Edison himself come along. The boy chosen was serious looking, but he understood on accepting the part that he must smile, which he did.

SEVENTH C. (*cheerfully*): Why, good morning, Mr. Edison, how are you?"
(*Great hand-shaking among the friends of West Orange*)

MR. E.: I'm well, I thank you.

FIFTH C.: Pretty big fire, Mr. Edison, isn't it?

MR. E. (*pointing into space*): There's a mighty expensive experiment but a good one.

SIXTH C.: Well, I reckon you'll be building that up again, say in a month or so, won't you?

MR. E.: There'll be a mobilization around here this morning if that stuff cools off enough, and when those buildings go up again, they go up fireproof.

FIRST C.: My, that's quick work, Mr. Edison.

MR. E.: I'm sixty-seven years old, but I'm none too old to take a fresh start. Nobody is ever too old to take a fresh start.

FOURTH C.: Gee, Mr. Edison, you must be one of them things you call a optimist, ain't you?

(Though there was much slang these were the only mistakes in grammar. It was the wag aforementioned who actually grieved over his errors as if they had been his first, and they were his first so far as real consciousness went, and he said, "Oh, Miss H, I made a mistake in grammar!")

EIGHTH C.: Did you save anything in your office?

NINTH C.: How about that picture of you I saw hanging over your desk?

MR. E.: Gone, too, I suppose.

FIRST C.: Look coming!

Down the street with all the impetus the narrow schoolroom would allow came a boy waving something which he put into the hands of the American wizard.

Boy: We found this just now.

Edison backed away from the crowd, looking at a charred picture in his hand while the impatient mob strained the rope and the policemen grew angry. Taking a pencil from his pocket, the great man wrote something on the picture, smiled, put it in the eager hands stretched out to his, said goodbye, and left. Then there was a great scramble to read, when one citizen cried, "Stand back, won't you, and I'll tell you what it says!" He held in the air a picture cut from the *American Magazine*, revealing the smiling face of Edison framed by an irregular rim of charred paper, a reproduction of the photograph made memorable by the optimistic epigram scribbled upon it by the inventor, and read aloud, "Never Touched Me." The crowd laughed and someone called, "Three cheers for Mr. Edison!" at which fifty lusty throats gave out three wall-shaking cries, as hats were tossed and handkerchiefs waved.

It is surprising how, when once in the spirit of the game, every magazine and newspaper calls out and suggests a play. Such a heading as "President Gets Right to Act as Newsboy" immediately catches the eye. Words like the following, coming out of the mouths of our citizens with accompanying feeling and understanding of the situation, are bound to make an indelible impression: "The right road is the straight road, and it is the only road that will carry any man where he would care to go, because I am sure you will feel as I do, that it isn't worth while to go anywhere if you cannot go with honor and self-respect. My message is, God bless you and guide you." This was part of a letter which President Wilson wrote to a few scrappy little newsboys in Baltimore, who responded by sending over to the White House a committee of newsies to thank Mr. Wilson in person. One of the boys, nicknamed "Germany," who was spokesman and very much embarrassed, tried to tell the President how they appreciated his letter, while "Giggles" presented the Executive with a badge entitling him to sell papers in their city. The President graciously responded and assured the boys if he ever got hard up he would use the badge

to make some money. It is a great thing for our young and our grown countrymen to speak the same language. Such a situation makes a play worth while.

Again, last summer, with its terrible European upheaval, made it possible to bring out feeling for home and all that it means. This, too, was acted after an assignment which tried to make the young folks glean all needed facts.

1. What are the names of some of the pictures and statuary in the Louvre?
2. How did people get home last summer after the announcement of war?
3. What are some of the things you see on entering New York harbor?

The aim of the lesson was to arouse the feeling for family, home, and country and to enable the students to express that feeling. There were two acts. One was in the Louvre Gallery in Paris where all were happy and gay, talking about pictures and artists, until someone entered breathlessly to say that war was declared, when there was a sudden transition and all were longing to get home. The second was on board ship, about three weeks later, with everybody tired and anxious, when suddenly came the shout, "Land!" and gradually they steamed into sight of the harbor, remarking fondly on the things they saw. Without warning an American flag appeared. What was the reaction? How did they say, "Home, home at last!" No one had to tell the travelers to cling to their vowels, no one had to beg for resonance of voice. It was as it is with the kindergarten child who cries, the first day of school, "I want to go ho-o-o-me." They were ready to read Scott's "Love of Country" and to salute the flag. Reference to this experience will revivify the emotions if at any later exercise the reading becomes dead and meaningless.

Difficulties will arise in this work, as in all live teaching. Discipline of the pin-dropping, clock-ticking kind will be impossible; but is such discipline a real training for life of the common type where one must learn to work in the midst of legitimate noise? The first dramatic results will be discouraging, but one must begin with the pupils where they are, and be content at first with meager gains if only these gains are healthful and constant. The object of this everyday work is not the entertainment of an audience by a few selected for special talent, but power for all. The wonderful

part is that you have let loose in the school a force that increases each time it is used, until finally the teacher has only the regulating and not the suggesting function. The start is the difficult part, for it cannot be forced; but we are sure that the instinct is inherent in each one of the children and will grow if properly nourished. It came to the point in one school, when a group of girls were supposed to run in and ask Joan of Arc to come out to play, that a youth said, "May we boys be the girls?" The teacher looked up quickly to see what it meant and saw it was a serious question. The boys played the girls' parts, dancing in as daintily in their heavy shoes as any young maidens might do. They had reached the point where they were curious to experience the new. Most of the school entertainments show off the too expressive child, but when we play, not for show, but for education, the same play is worked over and over with different children in each part until all have opportunities for development. It was good for a dainty little girl to be the first angel in "Abou Ben Adhem," but it was far better for the tough little boy across the aisle to ask and to be allowed to try that part when something of the sleeping angel in his nature had been aroused. The result of such teaching cannot be measured, for he who expresses himself but little in comparison with others with more native ability and self-confidence is making gains not always visible in the schoolroom.

Difficulties there are, but everything worth while presents as many. A feeling in the teacher's heart that dramatization of present-day life is proper for all of our boys and girls causes her to have a glowing attitude toward youth, for she is helping to conserve the joy of life. This is the greatest gift youth has to offer life—creative force. And dramatization points the way.

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